
The Second Baptism is First

Therefore, the Christian life is not about what the monks claim—that it means sending people into the wilderness or cloister. On the contrary, the Christian life leads you to those who need your works.¹

The spiritual orders, particularly those who live in monasteries and nunneries, brag that they lead contemplative lives. Well, they know as much about a contemplative life as a goose knows of the Psalter . . . our Lord has not commanded that we sit around and gaze up at heaven. Instead of a focus on a contemplative life God has commanded us to lead an active life in the world in faith, love and bearing of the cross.²

Life in the Western world in the late Middle Ages (1300–1500) can be likened to a three-story home. God and the heavenly court reside on the top floor. Beneath the Lord, on the middle level, are the religious people—monks, priests, nuns—who, by

1. Martin Luther, “Sermon on the Fourth Sunday after Trinity” (1529), WA 29:403. Translation mine.

2. Martin Luther, “Sermon on Day of St. John” (1527), WA 17(2):349. Translation mine.

virtue of their vows, have callings or vocations. Their public declarations to lead holy lives, characterized by poverty, chastity, and obedience, put them closer to their Creator and also provide greater assurance of blessed entrance into God's kingdom at the end of their lives. On the ground floor is the vast multitude of humanity. They are the folks who keep life going—the merchants, farmers, blacksmiths, midwives, mothers, and fathers. They are said to lack vocations because their daily activities inevitably involve worldly compromise that dilutes the pure love of God.

How did things come to be this way? In this opening chapter, we will describe how the church understood vocation on the eve of the Reformation. This will require a sweeping overview of some key developments in the previous two thousand years. We will begin by looking at thought world of the Greeks. This section will be followed by a review of biblical material on vocation, noting its centrality to the message of the Scriptures. And then, in a peculiar twist, we will see how the classical and biblical views were combined in a way that limited a sense of calling to a particular class of people. Also examined will be the church's sacramental system, especially baptism and penance, for both provide significant insights into the thought worlds of medieval men and women.

The Greeks

As many writers have noted, there has been a deep chasm in the Western tradition between the “thinkers” and the “doers,” or the contemplative and the active life. In a way, this makes sense intuitively. Human beings are different from the rest of the animal kingdom. We have the ability to reason and this sets us apart from other creatures. Given this capability, it is

not surprising that rational thought would be elevated above physical life. And this is exactly what happened in Greek philosophy, which was highly influential in the Western intellectual tradition.

For Plato, the external world, which we know by our senses, is subject to change and decay. The saying “the only thing that is permanent is change” reflects this viewpoint. Humans and animals are born, grow and develop, and eventually, die. The natural world around us reflects a similar pattern. Even the hardest of stones eventually grinds into dust. But this did not mean everything was changing and temporary. Plato believed we had access to another realm (he called it the “forms”) when we turn away from our senses (which only provide knowledge of the changing world) and focus instead on our souls, which provide contact with the eternal.

This act of turning inward or the undertaking of reflection was the first step of what the Greeks called “philosophy,” or the search for wisdom. They believed that the thought required to contemplate truth also implied leisure. The act of “doing” philosophy was not a “hobby” for the Greeks. It required strenuous effort and discipline. Naturally, it also meant that one had to be set apart from the distractions of the world. Making a living or looking after a household left no time to pursue this ideal. Moreover, the body also hinders the mind in its quest for wisdom. It is incessantly making demands—it needs food, clothing, exercise, and rest. Paying attention to the body can deflect from the contemplative life.

Now, it is obvious that the vast majority of human beings will not have the luxury of leading a life dedicated to philosophy. Plato and his followers recognized this. Many humans were consigned to a life of manual labor and most of the people in this group were slaves. A smaller number

led a higher type of life. They were the political leaders who organized society and provided security for the community. But then, there are the rare few who lead genuine philosophical lives. They benefit from the labor of the slave and the managerial skills of the politicians. But it is their contemplation of things divine and eternal that sets them apart.

The Biblical Context

Jews and Christians have long recognized that a central characteristic of God in the Bible is that of one who speaks or calls. For example, the opening chapter of Genesis reveals a God who creates by speaking. There are fourteen references to God speaking or calling in the first twenty-nine verses. Furthermore, Genesis 1 suggests that when God speaks, the effect is powerful and transformative. After all, it is possible to talk and have nothing happen. This is not the case with God's speech. At the beginning of each day of creation stands the phrase "And God said . . . ," which is followed by yet more details being added to earth's majestic landscape. The crowning achievement of God is the creation of humanity (Genesis 1:26), which, like rest of the world, is a result of divine speech and is made in God's very image.³

The completion of creation does not result in divine silence. It is the conviction of the Scriptures that the God who speaks continues to be active in the world. Genesis also tells us that God calls the nation of Israel into existence and assigns her the task of being his witness in the world. Moreover, it is important to notice that God's call to Israel is not abstract or general; it is

3. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis. A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 1-39. Brueggemann organizes his entire commentary on Genesis around the theme of God's call.

individuals who hear God's voice and respond in various ways. It might be instructive to cite several examples.

The call of Abraham and Sarah is immediate and direct. God says, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you and I will make of you a great nation and bless you." And the text simply reports that Abraham "went as the Lord had told him" (Genesis 12:1-4). But other calls tend to be more complicated.

God calls Moses dramatically through a burning bush. Upon hearing the identity of the voice, Moses hides his face, fearing the presence of the Holy One of Israel. However, following this initial encounter, the relationship between God and Moses becomes much more mundane and conflicted. God commissions Moses to deliver his people out of the hands of the Pharaoh. But Moses exhibits great reluctance to answer the call. He raises five separate objections to the task God has presented him. Finally, God becomes exasperated with Moses's excuses and the reluctant leader of Israel is forced to yield to the divine will.⁴

The prophet Jonah illustrates yet another way of responding to God's call. When he is told by God to go to Nineveh and speak a word of judgment, Jonah flees in the opposite direction. When God foils his travel plans (and the prophet becomes well acquainted with a large fish), Jonah ends up acquiescing to God's command and preaches to the wicked city of Nineveh. To his total surprise, his preaching is effective. Nineveh repents and avoids divine retribution. Interestingly, Jonah is completely undone by this turn of events and becomes angry at God for showing mercy and forbearance.

Two examples from the New Testament are also instructive

4. See Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 51-82.

for reflecting on the call of God. Mary is greatly troubled and afraid when she hears the greeting of the angel Gabriel. After learning that she is to be the mother of Jesus, her next reaction is to question the possibility of such a birth, given her virginity. Only after repeated assurances from the angelic messenger does she submit to the divine plan. The call of Jesus' disciples echoes the divine power displayed in the speech of creation. When Jesus sees Simon and Andrew casting nets into the sea, he summons them to follow. The reader is given no hint of hesitation; the fishermen hear the voice of Jesus and they immediately follow. A similar pattern of call and immediate response is repeated with the disciples James and John. These narratives impress upon the reader the irresistible force of Jesus' words and the way his speech results in a decisive break with the past. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes of this text: "This encounter (with the disciples) is a testimony to the absolute, direct, and unaccountable authority of Jesus. There is no need of any preliminaries, and no other consequence but obedience to the call."⁵

These biblical reflections on the call are but a small sampling of the available material. Much more could be said about the centrality of vocation within the authoritative texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition. But based on the material provided, we might draw the following conclusions about the shape and content of vocation in the Bible.

The God of the Bible is one who speaks. Fundamental to the character of God is speaking. The Scriptures witness time and again to a God who makes himself known through speech. This has significant consequences for the way a reader approaches the Bible. Instead of assuming a role of mastery over the text, where the primary goal is to probe and discover

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan, 1959), 57.

what a particular passage means, the student of the Bible, informed by a sense of vocation, begins with an attitude of expectant listening. The way to God may first be through our ears rather than a critical busyness that misses what God is actually trying to say. A sense of vocation or calling can only be nurtured if one is first attentive to the divine voice that speaks through the words of the Bible.

God's speech is powerful. As we have seen, Genesis 1 presents a God who speaks with powerful effect. These are not empty words to fill time while waiting for some meaningful activity to take place. The words themselves are the activity. They create and transform reality. As many have pointed out, the language of the Bible is not only informative or descriptive. In many cases, it is also "performative." In other words, the speech of Scripture has the power to effect change in the most profound way (Isaiah 55:10-11). Thus, one who listens for the voice of God in Scripture must be prepared for the power of the words addressed to the listener. In the realm of vocation, one enters a world that upends traditional ways of seeing reality and reorganizes priorities. Vocation has little in common with the typical human pursuits of comfort, security, and stability.

God's call can be resisted. While several of the biblical figures addressed by God appear to respond to the call with unquestioning obedience, some of the examples noted above indicate a less than enthusiastic reaction to the divine summons. Moses is perhaps the most famous example of reluctance in vocation. Before eventually trying God's patience, he invokes numerous excuses to avoid the assignment given to him. Jonah tries to ignore the call altogether before he discovers the futility of fleeing from the God of all creation. These examples are useful. While the Bible accentuates the power of God's speech, it is not the case that

humans are simply automatons without wills of their own. Thus, evidence of resistance in a calling should not be a cause for undue alarm. The Bible provides numerous cases of people whom God used in spite of their reluctance to answer the call.

God's call can be ambiguous. Mary's fear upon hearing the words of the angel Gabriel can serve as a lens for those whom a sense of calling is uncertain or tenuous. There is plenty of room in the concept of vocation for hesitation, questioning, and puzzlement. Even those who take up a stance of "expectant listening" find themselves in significant periods of divine silence. Or they may feel there are too many voices in their lives, and thus, find it difficult to sort out what constitutes a genuine call. To be avoided, however, is the modern tendency to wallow in ambiguity. While acknowledging the difficulty of discernment, the concept of vocation insists that God has spoken and continues to speak. Our hardness of hearing should not yield to a belief that God has stopped speaking.

God's call comes in the context of community. While the call comes to individuals in the Bible, it is never received in isolation. Vocation is always connected with a mission for the larger community. God summons Moses so that he might lead the people of Israel out of bondage. Mary is called so that she might bear the one who fulfills God's promises to Israel and the world. The disciples are called so that they might constitute the beginnings of a new community charged with telling the world of a new way that God has acted in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Underscored here is the dramatic difference between vocation and some modern strains of individualism. In vocation, the individual never stands alone. Rather, the one called is continually acting in the world and responding to the claims of God and the larger community.

God's call is gracious. This needs to be the last word in our summary comments about vocation in the Scriptures. Those in the realm of vocation often find themselves in bewildering circumstances. God tells Abraham: "Leave *your* country and *your* kindred and *your* father's house (emphasis mine) . . ." (Genesis 12:1). Embracing the call can mean a heartrending suffering where the familiar gives way to loneliness and alienation. Therefore, it is crucial to remind ourselves that the God who calls us is also a God who fundamentally favors us. The promises of Scripture point to a God who not only calls us, but a God who keeps and preserves us. For the Christian faith, this is highlighted most dramatically in the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Here, we have a model of one who takes all human opposition to God upon himself and is thereby driven to death. In a remarkable reversal, however, death does not have the final word. At the heart of the Christian confession is the belief that God has raised Jesus from the dead, and thus, vindicated his mission. Upon hearing the gracious voice of Christ in vocation, Christians are empowered to move beyond themselves and live lives of service and love.

The Early Christian World

It is hard to overestimate the influence that the Greeks had on the early Christian church. It could be said that Greek philosophy (like that sketched above) was intertwined with the world of antiquity in a way similar to how an idea like evolution is part of our own. In other words, it would be extremely difficult for early Christian writers to think about themselves and their world in a way that substantially escaped this framework.

Two opposing forces seem to be at work. On the one hand,